

Kenwood House

MARIE-CHRISTINE O'CALLAGHAN

Set on the edge of Hampstead Heath, Kenwood House is a magnificent example of neoclassical architecture. The first house on the site was probably a brick structure built in 1616. It was modified by its different owners until William Murray acquired it in 1756 and decided to have it remodelled by the Scottish architect Robert Adams. Murray was born in 1705 at Scone Palace in Scotland, the fourth son of the Viscount of Stormont. Murray went to Perth Grammar School but his obvious intelligence prompted his father to send him to Westminster School in London. The journey took the 13 year old William 54 days. His father's choice was vindicated as he was subsequently accepted at Oxford and was then called to the Bar by Lincoln's Inn in 1730, becoming Lord Chief Justice in 1758 and Lord Mansfield in 1776. He married Lady Elizabeth Finch in 1738. A portrait of Lady Elizabeth and her sister Lady Henrietta can be seen

in the entrance hall of Kenwood. The couple had no children, but raised a nephew, two nieces and two great-nieces.

The first great niece was Elizabeth Mary Murray (born 18 May 1760) the daughter of David Murray, who was to become the 2nd Earl of Mansfield, and his first wife Henrietta Frederica von Bunau. When her mother died in 1766, Elizabeth came to live at Kenwood House with her great uncle. She was shortly joined by another of Murray's great nieces: Dido Elizabeth Belle (born c.1761). Dido was the illegitimate daughter of Murray's nephew, Sir John Lindsay, a career naval officer. Dido's mother was Maria Belle and was an African woman, very possibly a slave who was held on a Spanish vessel that was captured by Lindsay. Nothing else is known of Maria Belle. Dido came to London with her father who entrusted her to his uncle who, by all accounts, took good care of her.

Dido was educated, given luxurious bedroom furnishings

and expensive medical treatments. As she grew older she managed the dairy and poultry yards at Kenwood, typical occupations for ladies but also, and unusually, she helped her uncle with his correspondence. In 1778 Lord Mansfield commissioned a painting of Elizabeth and Dido showing the two young girls in the grounds of Kenwood with a London skyline on the left. We know that Dido was loved and accepted within the household but as time went by the painting was seen as that of a mistress and her servant. It is possible, as has been suggested, that the artist, David Martin, created "a work depicting equal status, while allowing viewers outside of the family to frame the relationship in a societally-acceptable way." The painting is now in Scone Palace but Kenwood House has a photographic reproduction.

Today, there are no more Mansfields at Kenwood as the 6th Earl of Mansfield decided to sell. In 1925 it was bought by Edward Cecil Guinness, 1st Earl of Iveagh to display 63 of the finest pictures in his collection including one of Rembrandt's masterpieces: 'Self Portrait With Two Circles'.



Lady Elizabeth Finch Hatton (Murray) with her cousin Dido Elizabeth Belle by David Martin

HAMPSTEAD - GARDEN - SUBURB - TRUST

This year's HGST Members' Winter Lecture is:

George Cadbury and Bournville Village Trust

A talk by Duncan Cadbury, former Chair and Trustee of the Bournville Village Trust.

6.30pm for a 7pm start

Monday, 13th December 2021,

Henrietta Barnett School.

Refreshments provided.

This event is exclusively for Members of the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust. Any resident of the Suburb can become a Member free of charge.

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